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U.S. objects to French offer on mines

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WASHINGTON — The United States has expressed its concern to France concerning its offer to help remove mines placed in Nicaraguan ports by CIA-backed rebels, administration officials said yesterday.

The officials also said France did not consult the United States in advance. Since February, the mines have damaged at least seven foreign ships, including a Soviet tanker and a Japanese freighter.

France's offer was contained in a letter, disclosed Thursday in Managua, Nicaragua, from French Foreign Minister Claude Cheysson to Colombian President Belisario Betancur. It said France would help Nicaragua remove the mines for "purely humanitarian" reasons if "one or several friendly European powers" cooperated.

The incident renews friction between Washington and Paris over Central America. In 1982, the administration sharply criticized the French Socialist government for delivering military equipment to Nicaragua, a country the Reagan administration systematically denounces as the source of much of the trouble in the region.

"We have raised our concerns with the French," State Department spokesman John Hughes told reporters. "We have, all along, been concerned with the large Soviet and Cuban military relationship with Nicaragua, and we would not favor any nation's contributing to Nicaragua's ability to export revolution with impunity."

Hughes indicated that a French decision to remove the mines would run counter to U.S. interests, adding that the United States was still uncertain how far the French were prepared to go.

"There are still some areas of doubt about what the French involvement might be and what the French are prepared to do, and, indeed, what they are being quoted as saying," he said.

Hughes did not say how U.S. concerns were conveyed to the French, but other administration officials said U.S. diplomats in Paris and State Department officials here discussed the matter with French officials.

Asked whether the United States would oppose France "directly or militarily" if it disregarded U.S. wishes and removed the mines, Hughes declined to comment. "We are now delving into the hypothetical," he said. "Let events occur and mature."

Although the CIA's covert assistance to the rebels, known as contras, is widely discussed and was the subject of intense debate this week in the Senate, administration officials refuse to comment on it directly, saying it belongs in the realm of classified intelligence.

Sources close to the congressional intelligence committees said yesterday, in response to questions, that CIA Director William J. Casey recently briefed the House Select Committee on Intelligence on the mining operation.

According to those sources, Casey and other CIA officials said at a closed session that the mines were placed at the approaches to Corinto and Puerto Sandino ports on Nicaragua's Pacific coast and El Bluff on its Caribbean coast.

The sources said it was their un-

derstanding that the mines were placed by a special counterrevolutionary unit made up mostly of people not from Nicaragua, though they were Latin Americans or of Latin American origin. They said the unit operated from a ship believed to cruise off the Nicaraguan coast.

During the Senate debate this week about an additional \$21 million for the contras, which was approved Thursday, Sen. Barry M. Goldwater (R., Ariz.), chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, inadvertently referred to a document apparently confirming that the administration had directly authorized the mining.

Goldwater later said such a document did not exist, but a source within his committee confirmed that staff aides had prepared a classified paper apparently linking the CIA to the activity.

Goldwater's remarks did not appear in the Congressional Record, which publishes transcripts of floor debate. Congressional sources indicated that on a request from the intelligence committee, the remarks were deleted.